

Conflict and Forgiveness

Conflict. It seems to be all around us these days. There is really nowhere to escape it. I can't tell you how many times a day I hear one of my co-workers, or myself say something like, "I am going to go to the mountain and live there alone, away from all the crazy people in the world." Anxiety is at an all time high, and we all feel it everyday. At the store, in the news, on social media, at work, and yes, sadly, even in our church. And, so, as believers, we pray, we read our Bibles and we try to deal with it all. But how are we dealing with it, really? Complaining, worrying, stressing are not healthy ways to deal with the issues surrounding us. Getting along with others whose opinions differ from our own can be tough. Let's face it, there are about a million different opinions on everything right now.

Conflict has been around since the beginning of time. Getting along with our fellow man is not always easy. In Genesis, we read the story of Joseph and his not so kind brothers. Joseph's brothers quickly become jealous of Joseph and the favor he has found with his father. His brothers just want him out of the picture and end up selling Joseph into slavery. Later, Joseph becomes a great leader under Pharaoh, in Egypt. A famine strikes, and soon Joseph's brothers find themselves in Egypt looking for food. After many twists and turns in the story, Joseph's heart is tender and in kindness and forgiveness, he says these words to his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

We are called as Christians to live in love with our fellow man. Where there is conflict, we need to work to resolve it. In Romans, chapter 13,

we are encouraged to remember the laws that God gave to Moses- the 10 commandments. The commandments given to us on how to love God and how to love our neighbor. And Paul sums it all up, really in one big, very important commandment. "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

There is a very simple story about some people in a boat. One of the passengers in the boat begins to bore a hole beneath the place where he is sitting. Others begin to ask him what he is doing. His response is to basically mind their own business as he is not making the hole under their seats, but only his own seat. Obviously, one hole in a boat would sink the whole thing!

Are we thinking only of ourselves or about all those around us as well?

We have a very hurting, confused, lonely world outside those doors.

Maybe even here inside as well. We need to take the focus off of ourselves. As we think we are doing nothing to harm others or that by keeping to ourselves, we are somehow solving things, we are wrong.

We are called to live a life of forgiveness. When someone wrongs us, we must confront them. It is one of the hardest things in the world to do, but as we read in Matthew, "if a brother sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you."

The other side of that as well, which is very important, and that is of forgiveness. It is hard to forgive. I learned a huge lesson in forgiveness. Most of you know my story of leaving my home church only to attend another church that went from flourishing, growing, loving and fulfilling to a place of harsh, angry words and in the end,

numerous people going their own separate ways. For a week, maybe even a month, I cried myself to sleep. I almost never cry, but I could not get past the hurt and anger and cruelty that had happened there. I

*in a church
with God's
people*

knew I needed to forgive those people at that church, but I just couldn't. The hurt was too real and painful. I prayed and prayed that God would help me to forgive. We left that church and returned to our original home church. As I began to go out as a lay minister, I knew the time would come to go to that church to preach, and I really was not sure I could do it. Later, our church became a parish with that very church. My pastor asked me to cover both churches one Sunday. Knowing my story, he asked if I was comfortable, and with God working through me, I said yes. As I wrote the sermon for that Sunday, it became a story of love and forgiveness as I pictured each face in that congregation who so badly hurt so many. And I knew without a doubt

that, after praying for years to be able to forgive, I truly had forgiven each of them. Because of God's grace and mercy in my life, he helped my heart to heal and find a way to forgive.

Our job, here on earth, in times of great conflict is to show love. To forgive and show grace. God, in Christ Jesus has shown us grace upon grace. Can't we too, show some grace to those whose opinions and feelings are far different from our own? Have we forgotten the grace and forgiveness shown to us on the cross? The power and love poured out for us in Jesus' blood? That love, that forgiveness, that grace was for all. Not just for those we see eye to eye with all the time. That grace was for those members of that church that I so badly wanted to forgive and finally did. That grace is for all. We don't get to decide who that grace is extended to, but only to strive to live our lives showing and sharing that grace with all we meet. Amen